

Yorick's Afterlives: Skull Properties in Performance

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Abstract

Hamlet's address to Yorick's skull is at the heart of the Shakespearean canon, but is often conflated with the equally famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy in act 3, scene 1. This article reasserts the importance of the skull property by examining its afterlife on the modern stage, arguing that the use of real human remains in productions of *Hamlet* reveals a strong desire on the part of actors and theatergoers to be part of a kind of sacred lineage. The play text makes it clear that we can never be entirely sure whose skull it is that the gravedigger hands to Hamlet; it might be that of the prince's jester, a great lady, or a horse thief. The use of actual skulls — many of which have their own complicated life histories — as stage properties underscores the transgressive potential of the scene and testifies to the theater's ambivalent relationship to narratives of transcendence.

Hamlet is famous for, among other things, being the first early modern play to bring the human skull on stage as a property.¹ Yorick's skull is perhaps the most concrete token of remembrance in a play devoted to the vagaries of memory, and Hamlet's famous apostrophe has become a metonym for the entire work, if not for the Shakespearean canon itself (Holderness 1988, 8). This paper examines the after-life of Yorick's skull on the modern stage, arguing that the property calls attention to the tension between the transitory nature of the theatrical medium and the desire — expressed by both actors and audiences — to preserve the performance experience. In a surprising number of cases, the skull chosen to represent "Yorick" has a real human being behind it, a human being whose connection to the theater survives the death of the mortal body. The reverent treatment of such skulls resists the play's own warnings about the anonymity of death, but it also attempts to resist the impermanent quality of the theatrical medium itself.

The use of real skulls in productions of *Hamlet* has become such a common feature of the play's history that the creators of the Canadian Broadcasting Company's *Slings and Arrows* were able to spoof the practice in the opening episodes of the show's first season. The series, which pokes fun at the Shakespeare industry (especially as practiced in Stratford, Ontario) focuses on the misadventures of a brilliant, but mentally unstable actor who finds himself suddenly called upon

to take up the artistic directorship of Canada's leading Shakespeare company, for which he was once the lead performer. In assuming the role of prodigal son he must also fulfill the last request of his famous mentor, whose ghost demands that his skull appear in the company's production of *Hamlet*. The ghost's appearance confirms Marvin Carlson's assertion that "our theatrical memories are haunted by *Hamlet*," but the conflation of the figures of Hamlet's father and Yorick, together with the comic tone of the ghost's fatherly complaints, also make the skull a symbol of the actor's unwillingness to follow in his mentor's footsteps (Carlson 2001, 79). Thus, the protagonist's ambivalent attitude towards the skull mirrors the show's mixture of affection for and frustration with the Shakespearean establishment.

For some scholars, the satirical approach taken by these and other metatheatrical comedies such as Branagh's *A Midwinter's Tale* (1995) has tended to overshadow our experience of *Hamlet*. Noting the degree to which the skull has become a clichéd stand-in for the entire plot, Phoebe Spinrad complains that Yorick has become "nothing more than a box office gimmick designed to draw laughter or screams from the audience." For Spinrad, the skull has been devalued, lumped in with "plastic Halloween masks . . . articulated cardboard skeletons" and other forms of "low class gore" (Spinrad 1984, 8-9). This approach, however, underestimates the continued seriousness with which the scene is treated by both playgoers and actors. Simultaneously an object of disgust and the anchor for Hamlet's strongest childhood memories, the skull hints at the power of the theatrical narratives that give life to dead objects. And however flattened out *Hamlet* has become as an icon of the canon, Yorick's skull continues to hold sway over our imaginations, particularly because it appears to offer us a kind of permanent cultural placeholder.

The graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, in which the prince is brought face to face with the skull of his dead playmate, entertains the possibility that bodily remains can connect us to those we have lost. What the iconic image of Yorick makes us forget, however, is that the rest of the gravedigger scene is more or less consumed with death's anonymity.² With the face intact, the head is the one body part that should be instantly recognizable, but with the flesh gone, we cannot even tell the skull of a man from that of a woman, as the initial exchange between Hamlet and the gravedigger makes clear. Hamlet debates the skull's identity with Horatio, playfully assigning it to politicians, courtiers, lawyers, and landowners, and the gravedigger eventually concedes that its owner is "one that was a woman, sir; but rest her soul, she's dead" (5.1.127).³ Sensing Hamlet's need for a story, a name to attach to the heads rolling around on stage, the gravedigger at last produces evidence to contradict the anxiety inspired by the preceding lines. Holding up a new skull or possibly pointing to the first one, the gravedigger announces its provenance: "Here's a skull now hath lien you i'th'

earth three and twenty years" (163-64). After a brief, tantalizing pause, he produces a name. "This same skull, sir," he tells Hamlet, "was Yorick's skull, the King's jester" (170-71). Finally, we have a positive identification, allowing Hamlet to launch into the monologue in which he literally puts the flesh back on the bone, pointing to the lips that once hung around the gaping mouth (178-79).

If we believe the dialogue, however, at least two skulls remain on stage to remind Hamlet of his own approaching death, and according to Steven Urkowitz, the script justifies at least four or five (Urkowitz 1986, 59). As Hamlet himself points out early in the scene, what is most disturbing about this plurality of skulls is that they are unidentifiable, and thus subject to abuse. "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once," Hamlet insists. "Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggets with 'em? Mine ache to think on't" (5.1.71-72, 86-88).⁴ Pascale Aebischer has argued that the most disturbing aspect of this scene is the irreverent way in which it treats mortality.⁵ Behind the fooling, however, there lies a deeper problem — not just that the skulls are being knocked about, but that this treatment is justified by the fact that we have no idea whose skulls they are.

Recent discussions of this scene have tended to focus on the way in which the skull property creates a slippage between subject and object.⁶ In Marjorie Garber's formulation, the *memento mori* reminds us of what we will one day become, but Yorick's skull tells us that this is what we are now, suggesting that the distinction between dead objects and live subjects is not as straightforward as we might think (Garber 1981). Andrew Sofer's reading of the play draws on Garber's, but places an even stronger emphasis on the personhood of the skull, arguing that, like the holographic object in Hans Holbein's *Ambassadors*, it is anamorphic, slipping back and forth between mere thingness and uncanny vitality. The object stubbornly refuses to stay dead, while turning Hamlet and his companions into mere props through its evocation of their fragile fleshiness (Sofer 2003, 94). Both Sofer and Garber note that Yorick's appearance introduces an important "turn" in the scene; the theoretical discussion of death's ravages has suddenly become real, and Hamlet is confronted with an object that reminds him of his own mortality.

The skull's uncanny subjectivity does not, however, imply that we must take it seriously as Yorick. On the contrary, the doubling and tripling of skull properties in the scene, together with the joking dialogue that surrounds Hamlet's speech, undermine the notion that we can firmly connect any one of them to a single individual.⁷ Sofer accuses the prince of transforming the skull into a trope of courtly corruption and thereby refusing to see his own mortality in it, but it is no wonder that Hamlet fails to make the connection between the skull and his own person when confronted with such a profusion of riddles and bones (Sofer 2003, 96). As Kenneth Branagh muses in his notes

on his film version of the play, "if there were any more of these bloody things [the Gravedigger] could set up a skull shop" (quoted in Aebischer 2004, 95).

The unreliability of the gravedigger, a fictional character, is of course as difficult to prove as his claims about the skull's identity. Equally challenging is the task of discovering whether or not actual skulls were used as properties in seventeenth-century productions of the play. We do, however, have a preponderance of evidence for the appearance of real skulls on the post-Reformation stage. By 1755, theater critic Paul Hiffernan was already complaining about the regular use of "real Skulls and bones in the Gravedigging Scene of Hamlet, to which a wooden Substitution might be easily made." One hundred years later, a writer for *The Theatrical Journal* described the actors' mistreatment of human remains as "highly indecent, at the same time repulsive to the audience" (quoted in Sprague 1963, 173-74). In addition to their unseemliness, actual body parts duplicate the problem raised in Hamlet's script: playgoers are left to wonder where they came from and whose lips hung there before the worms ate them. When not confronted with blank anonymity, the audience is left with the possibility of an unruly substitution; the skull may carry with it identities that predate its arrival in a given role, identities which complicate its role as the prince's jester. Though the graveyard scene problematizes the idea of human remains as accurate preservers of memory, the skulls that move through and between modern productions of the play are expected to do just that: to keep theatrical memories, and theatrical fame, alive.

Skulls as Stage Relics

The increasing use of human skulls in productions of *Hamlet* coincides with the development of the Shakespeare industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the appearance of "stage relics," objects made sacred within the community of collectors and theatergoers through their connection to productions of Shakespeare's plays.⁸ Like the main character in *Slings and Arrows*, who eventually concedes to his dead friend's request, the actors and collectors who traded in stage relics were rewarded for believing in the provenance of such objects by having their faith in the power of theater restored. Many stage relics took on a vital role within an intra-theatrical economy, establishing a pattern of lineage that we can trace back at least as far as David Garrick, though they also tended to show up in commercial auction lots as well.⁹ In either case, they help to demonstrate the degree to which an involvement in Shakespearean productions elevates the status of "ordinary" human beings and, even more explicitly than in other artistic forms, creates a cult of memory around them; in fact, eighteenth and nineteenth-century inventories and newspaper articles explicitly used the language of the "relic" to describe these otherwise secular items. We can define stage relics, then, as items that would not necessarily be of any special value to players or playgoers during

the moment of performance, but that accrue meaning, both affective and economic, as traces of that performance once the run has ended. Whether stage properties enshrined as mementos of a particular performance or personal effects of an individual actor, stage relics capture something of the ephemeral quality of theatrical performance in a material object — as long as the narratives surrounding them survive intact.

Like Catholic relics, these objects drew their value from their proximity to the actor's body and gained additional meanings as they moved from hand to hand in what Barbara Hodgdon calls "the Shakespearean exchange economy" (Hodgdon 1998, 191). The tooth of actor George Frederick Cooke was given to Edwin Booth, one of the century's most famous Hamlets, and a lock of Edmund Kean's hair cut in 1833 passed through Henry Irving to a London playing company, who listed it in their inventory of 1896 (*The Players* 1905, 8; 1896, 6). More recently, a sword originally used by Kean in his production of *Richard III*, which had passed from Irving to Terry to Gielgud, was given by Gielgud to Olivier (Sher 2007). These examples help reinforce the ways in which the concept of theatrical lineage enhances the value of stage relics; they transcend the gap between past and present and promise a kind of immortality to the actors associated with them. Muriel Bradbrook once imagined "a moment from *Hamlet's* first performance where, at Ophelia's graveside, Armin and Richard Burbage stand, each with a hand on Tarleton's skull — the present leading players remembering, and touching upon, their heritage" (quoted in Thomson 1983, 111). This fanciful reconstruction is informed, at least in part, by the fact that the generations of actors who came after Burbage and Armin might well have been tempted to indulge in a similar moment of metatheatrical remembrance — a moment, as Hodgdon puts it, in which "the theatre talks *of* itself *to* itself" (quoted in Hodgdon 2006, 136). A publicity image from the 1992 BBC radio *Hamlet*, for instance, shows Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet holding a skull, with Derek Jacobi (Claudius) and John Gielgud (Ghost) looking over each of his shoulders. The older actors appear to be in character, but their positioning also registers as a gesture of approbation, framing Branagh within the context of great English Hamlets.

The skull currently owned by the Horace Howard Furness Memorial Library at the University of Pennsylvania bears its lineage on its surface, having been signed on the cranium by all the major nineteenth-century actors who played Hamlet in Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre: Kean, Macready, Kemble, Booth, Forrest, Cushman, Davenport, Murdock, and Brooks (figure 1). The exhibition card attached to the object begins with the famous lines from Hamlet's monologue on the skull and goes on to assert that the item once belonged to a licensed pharmacist named Mr. Carpenter, "who had loaned it to many actors." The signatures, which are still legible, act as proof of this claim just as the lines from the play somehow evoke those monumental performances (Traister

2000, 76). Marvin Carlson reminds us that the "expectations an audience bring to a new reception experience are the residue of memory of previous such experiences," but in this case it is the actors, and not just the audience, whose participation in the play is mediated by the remainders of previous performances (Carlson 2001, 5). As far as the exhibition card is concerned, the skull belongs to the actors who played Hamlet with it and has no prior life history. Whoever it originally belonged to, the Furness skull functioned like the stage relics circulated between great performers; it was meant to endow each of them with his predecessor's spirit and to serve as a memorial to all the great performances of *Hamlet* that would endure in the popular imagination long after their run had ended. This is the irony of dedicating a museum to the theater: its entire aim is to try to resist the conclusion that the power of drama exists in the moment of performance, not in any record or memorial preserved for the sake of history.¹⁰

In one sense, then, Furness's project is identical to the one problematized in the graveyard scene, whose collection of undifferentiated bones suggests that Yorick's skull cannot, in fact, be distinguished from all the others that have accumulated since the death of Alexander. Despite the best efforts of Furness and other denizens of the Shakespeare establishment, the presence of real skulls on the stage often helps to draw out, rather than smooth over, the complex questions about the anonymity of death that are raised in the script. Joseph Roach's definition of performance as a set of actions that "hold open a place in memory" has become incredibly useful to scholars of performance who want to describe the reiterative power of both theater and ritual. Importantly, however, the space opened up by performance is one "into which many different people may step according to circumstances and occasions" (Roach 1996, 36). As in Judith Butler's work, which emphasizes the potential for failure in a performance that must be created over and over again on a daily basis, the attempt to use human skulls to cite continually the lives of famous actors inevitably falls victim to the vagaries of chance and human subjectivity. Fortunately, these moments of failure also provide a place where theater breaks free of the elitist rules that determine who is and who is not worthy to speak Shakespeare's words. Carol Chillington Rutter remarks that "Shakespeare is the birthright, in the blood, of every English actor," but the material presence of the skull opens up the script to the addition of surprising new players (Rutter 2006, 176). The graveyard scene in *Hamlet* resists the actor's desire for connection and immortality, while the play's immense popularity appears to satisfy it by authenticating the lineage linking all the performers who have starred in the title role. Mirroring this paradox, the slippery nature of the skull's personhood — which rests on its tenuous identification as Yorick — points to the ways in which the theater can make room for bodies and stories that might ordinarily be exiled from the Shakespearean establishment. In what follows, I

draw upon a number of nineteenth-century accounts of the use of real skulls in *Hamlet* in order to demonstrate the difficulty of anchoring a coherent Shakespearean lineage in a series of material objects with their own complicated life histories.¹¹

Nineteenth-century Skulls: Destabilizing Theatrical Lineage

By contrast with the tradition of the stage relic as bearer of cultural memory, the practice of using real human skulls on stage seems to have originated with actors who wanted to shock or surprise their audience by playing with the idea of what it would mean to bring real death on stage. The Anglo-American actor George Vandenhoff tells the story of a troupe of players traveling in Lancashire in the mid-nineteenth century who discovered that they were performing in a converted chapel formerly associated with a local preacher named Dr. Banks. Midway through 5.1, the actor playing the gravedigger became fed up with the especially pompous Hamlet and decided to teach him a lesson, announcing that "[t]his skull sir . . . This was DOCTOR BANKS'S skull!" The tragedian was incensed, but endeavored to keep the dialogue going, insisting that it was in fact Yorick's. "No," the gravedigger laughed, picking up another skull prop, "[t]his is Yorick's skull, the king's jester; but t'other's Doctor Banks's, as I *told* you" (Vandenhoff 1860, 100; emphasis in original). The actor's improvisation hints at the idea of bringing an actual relic, the skull of a churchman, into the performance. Perhaps more importantly, the identification of the stage property as an actual skull serves to further undercut the suggestion within the fiction that the skull Hamlet addresses can be linked to Yorick in any definitive way. This anecdote aptly demonstrates the ease with which human remains, each carrying its own messy history, can further complicate the fictional narrative.

Sometime around the middle of the nineteenth century, the Irish-born actor George Frederick Cooke is said to have made a noteworthy post mortem appearance in *Hamlet*, followed by an after-party in which Cooke's admirers established to their satisfaction the authenticity of the relic, using the latest scientific methods. The following is from the memoirs of John Doran, though other accounts give the anonymous prop manager credit for acquiring the skull from one Dr. Francis:

A theatrical benefit had been announced at the Park, and "Hamlet" the play. A subordinate [*sic*] of the theatre at a late hour hurried to my office, for a skull. I was compelled to loan the head of my old friend, George Frederick Cooke. "Alas, poor Yorick!" It was returned in the morning; but on the ensuing evening, at a meeting of the Cooper Club, the circumstance becoming known to several members, and a general desire being expressed to investigate, phrenologically, the head of the great tragedian, the article was again released from its privacy, when Daniel Webster, Henry Wheaton, and many others who enriched the meeting

of that night, applied the principles of craniological science to the interesting specimen before them . . . Cooke enacted a great part that night.(Doran 1865, 386)

According to the theater critic Dutton Cook, who retells the latter part of this story in more detail, "[t]he head was pronounced capacious, the function of animality amply developed; the height of the forehead ordinary; the space between the orbits of unusual breadth," all of which confirmed what Kean, Booth, and the other connoisseurs of Cooke's acting already knew about his innate talents, just as Hamlet's examination of Yorick's skull seems to provide evidence of the gravedigger's claims. The phrenological tests, which Cook describes as contributing to the "variety and gratification of that memorable evening," allowed this group of famous men to reestablish Cooke's status as one of their own (Cook 1883, 1:225).

The narratives presented so far illuminate two distinct viewpoints about the use of actual human skulls on stage. In the case of the Walnut Street Theatre skull, it seems not to matter whose skull the actors were using. The point in this case is that great men have signed the skull, making it theirs and therefore part of the sacred apparatus of the Shakespearean establishment. In the case of George Frederick Cooke, on the other hand, it matters profoundly whose skull Hamlet is holding. We might even argue that the phrenological exhibition was not a mere formality, but rather the only appropriate response, after Betterton had made his famous friend the object of a disquisition on the fragility of memory. A more ambiguous case is that of a performance in Wilmington, Delaware, which took place on the site of an old potter's field. The stage manager, "a wild Irishman," brought out two real skulls for the actors to use from the heap of bones that were lying just under the stage (Ellsler 1950, 71). The actors decided not to mention the provenance of the skulls to the audience, perhaps because the skulls they unearthed belonged to unnamed paupers, but later they did describe the use of these local properties as a notable feature of the production. It is no accident, I think, that the Furness skull is stabilized by its presence in a museum and that the Cooke skull received a similar treatment in a gentleman's library; when it comes to accounts of actual performances, like the ones in Lancashire and Delaware, there is a much greater possibility of a disjunction between the identity of the skull and an idealized Shakespearean lineage. My next set of anecdotes suggests that the use of real skulls often entails doing a certain violence to their original owners, removing any unsightly personal details in order to make them suitable company for the great actors of the nineteenth-century stage.

According to legend, one of Junius Brutus Booth's prized possessions was the skull of a notorious horse thief named Fontaine. The two met in jail, where Booth was sobering up from a bout of drunkenness, and Fontaine later willed Booth his skull — because, of course, he wanted

to appear in *Hamlet* along with his idol. I have yet to find documentary proof that Booth fulfilled this request, but a skull did pass from Junius Booth to his son Edwin, and like the Furness skull, this head bears the younger actor's signature as evidence of its participation in his performance. In an unusually democratic move, it was also signed by the man who played the gravedigger in 1890, Owen Fawcett (Ellsler 1950, 73).

Like the skulls in the graveyard scene, this narrative tends to multiply, and in his 1903 recollection, *The Ponkapog Papers*, poet Thomas Bailey Aldrich tells a far stranger version of the story. In this account, the anonymous horse thief is described as a man to whom Booth lent money while on tour "somewhere in the wild West." His good deed done, the actor never gave the man another thought, until he reappeared one morning in Kentucky:

As the elder Booth was seated at breakfast one morning in a hotel in Louisville, Kentucky, a negro boy entered the room bearing a small osier basket neatly covered with a snowy napkin. It had the general appearance of a basket of fruit or flowers sent by some admirer, and as such it figured for a moment in Mr. Booth's conjecture. On lifting the cloth the actor started from the chair with a genuine expression on his features of that terror which he was used so marvelously to simulate as Richard III in the midnight tent-scene or as Macbeth when the ghost of Banquo usurped his seat at table. In the pretty willow-woven basket lay the head of Booth's old pensioner, which head the old pensioner had bequeathed in due legal form to the tragedian, begging him henceforth to adopt it as one of the necessary stage properties in the fifth act of Mr. Shakespeare's tragedy of "Hamlet." "Take it away, you black imp!" thundered the actor to the equally aghast negro boy, whose curiosity had happily not prompted him to investigate the dark nature of his burden. (Aldrich 1903, 134-35)

Here the amusing notion of using a horse thief's skull as Yorick becomes unsavory, in part because the presence of the African American child draws out the barriers of class and race separating the various participants in the transaction from one another. The head, not yet stripped of its flesh, is all too recognizable as the old pensioner, and its proximity to the "dark" youth only underscores its unsuitability for the Shakespearean stage. Intriguingly, the force of the actor's passion is measured by its similarity to Booth's depiction of various Shakespearean characters: real death has produced a theatrically memorable performance. Aldrich goes on to say that Booth finally came to see the humor in the request, presumably after the skull had been thoroughly cleaned, and agreed to fulfill it. But after a few turns as Yorick, the skull became an official stage relic, and Edwin Booth made a

papier maché cast of it to preserve the real one from receiving a regular buffeting on stage (Aldrich 1903, 135).

This second narrative closes off the possibility that the play so gleefully explores — the idea that any of us could play Yorick. And despite the fact that Booth eventually agreed to use the head brought to him in the fruit basket, Aldrich and others came to associate it with the Booth family and their part in the greater Shakespearean lineage, not with the unnamed criminal or the horrified boy who became the unfortunate object of Booth's rage. For Aldrich, the skull is Yorick, and when, like Hamlet, he imagines its past lives, it is Shakespeare's character who plays an active role in his fantasies: "Edwin Booth had forgotten, if ever he knew, the name of the man; but I had no need of it in order to establish acquaintance with poor Yorick" (Aldrich 1903, 136). His insistence on giving the skull its own personhood helps to erase its unpleasant pre-Shakespearean history, which is marked by barriers of both class and race.

A slightly less repugnant version of this story appears in the memoirs of John Adams Ellsler, a friend of Edwin Booth. According to Ellsler, in the middle of a tour the senior Booth decided that plaster skulls were no longer acceptable in his production and demanded a real one. His son, who was then traveling with him, appealed to one of the locals, again a young African American, who provided the necessary item for a reasonable fee, but asked for the object back at the end of the run. Admitting that he did not know "the market price of such commodities," Edwin Booth offered to buy the object from him, to which the boy replied: "[a]h can't sell dat, nohow; dat skull 'longs to my ole man, an — an — an [ah] just borrowed, from de grave, fer yo to use" (Ellsler 1950, 71-72). Two elements of this narrative provide a dramatic contrast to Aldrich's. The first is that Ellsler links the African American boy with the skull directly, by way of lineage, and makes his attempt to restore the sanctity of his father's gravesite the punch line, a kind of modern analogue to Hamlet's own delayed revenge. While Aldrich is quite happy to forget that there ever was a "dark" subject behind the Booth skull, Ellsler makes us remember that, "that skull had a tongue in it" (5.1.74). Here again, but for very different reasons, it matters profoundly whose skull the actor playing Hamlet is holding.

The second noteworthy aspect of this story is that it deprives Booth of the chance to reject the idea of using an African American skull in his production. William Charles Macready, who was on tour in Virginia in 1848, was not given the same opportunity and complained of this oversight after the fact. In his personal diary, he blames the failure of one of his performances on the stagehands, who provided him with the skull of "a negro who was hung [sic] two years ago for cutting down his overseer" (Macready 1976, 257). Pascale Aebischer labels the substitution an act of symbolic revenge, and it does underscore the transgressive potential embedded in the scene (Aebischer 2004,

85). This substitution deserves closer attention, however, especially in light of the phrenological examination carried out on the skull of George Frederick Cooke. What would it have meant, in late nineteenth-century America, to use the skull of a black man in *Hamlet*? Could such a skull really be distinguished from that of a white actor with a more developed function of "animality"?

A racialized society, as Paul Gilroy argues, results from the intermixing of "science and superstition" (Gilroy 1998, 843). Like phrenology, the discourse of race allows those who wield power to project their understanding of the world onto other human beings through the use of labels and categories. Gilroy suggests that the primary technology for establishing racial identities is a process he calls "epidermalization," the notion that individuals can be made intelligible through an analysis of their skin. On one level, the skull seems to escape the discourses of race that have poisoned western history: there is no skin to be found, and thus no obvious racial marker. On the other hand, the skull cannot escape the technology closely associated with epidermalization, the study of cranial features. Whether in the sixteenth century or the twenty-first, *Hamlet* reminds us that we will continue to cling to the apparent visual differences between subjects and others as long as there is physical evidence to examine; the recurrence of the argument that individuals of African descent have inherently lower IQ scores is only a thinly veiled version of this same instinct. We have seen that the play allows for a radical critique of class hierarchies by refusing to let the skull sustain any kind of stable identity, but as these anecdotes demonstrate, audiences' ability to access that moment of resistance is limited by the historical moment in which the play is performed.

At the beginning of this section, I suggested that the affective value of the Furness skull resulted from its affiliation with the nineteenth century's most famous Hamlets, but it, too, may have had its own life outside the theater. In 1889, Charles Dickens recorded the story of John Reed, employed as a gas-lighter at the Walnut Street Theater for forty-four years, who requested in his will that in honor of his many years of service, his head be removed from his corpse, bequeathed to the company, and be used to "represent the skull of Yorick" (Dickens 1889, 178).¹² The choice of the term "represent" calls attention to the mimetic quality of the enterprise — John Reed is not Yorick, but his skull will materialize the idea of Yorick. This language betrays a certain uneasiness not only about the idea of using human remains, but also about the class difference between himself and the men who will be handling his skull. This difference mimics the gap in status between the jester and the prince, the tragedian and the gasman, but it also suggests that the two-fold transformation these objects undergo — first in the dramatic fiction, and later in the intra-theatrical economy — makes room for a multiplicity of bones.

Twentieth-century Skulls: Staging Authenticity

Nineteenth-century American anecdotes about the use of real skulls in *Hamlet* open up the possibility that Yorick could be represented by a lower class or racial other, contributing an even more powerful emotional charge to the already controversial image of the prince caressing the skull of his servant. These same narratives, however, tend to close down such possibilities almost immediately. Only the Ellsler story points in a different direction, giving the young man the chance to reassert control over his father's remains rather than allowing his identity to be subsumed by the purifying project of Shakespearean lineage. By contrast, twentieth-century examples of this particular theatrical phenomenon appear to transcend, or perhaps to avoid, the themes of otherness that emerged in earlier decades. Rather than worrying about whether the skull at hand is worthy of the role of Yorick, modern actors confronted by actual skulls seem concerned with the philosophical problem of what it means to bring something real into a theatrical fiction. Peter Hall, for instance, wrote in his diary in 1975 that the use of a human skull in rehearsal made "the actuality of the scene" more palpable to the actors, just as the horse thief's skull caused the elder Booth to experience a genuine sense of horror (Hall 1984, 189). Similarly, the protagonists in the following narrative attempt to sustain the boundary between fiction and reality by rejecting presentation — the uncanny presence of actual death — in favor of representation.

In 1980, a concert pianist named Andre Tchaikovsky went to the Royal Shakespeare Company to see *Hamlet*. He fell in love with the play, and on his deathbed asked that his skull be donated to the company so that it could appear as Yorick in the graveyard scene. Upon Tchaikovsky's death, his executor sent the skull to Terry Hands, the RSC's artistic director. Hands, in turn, passed it along to the Property Department, much to the alarm of its manager. There the skull languished for nine years until Mark Rylance began to inquire about using it in his production of the play. Rylance's cast, however, eventually became unsettled by the notion of seeing human remains knocked about with a shovel. Claire van Kampen writes that the actors felt "privileged to be able to work the Gravedigger scene with a real skull," but agreed that using Tchaikovsky's head in the theater would upset "the complicity of illusion between actor and audience." She goes on to reflect that "some of us felt a certain primitive taboo about the skull, although the Gravedigger, as I recall, was all for it" (quoted in Aebischer 2004, 86).

The company's proposed solution to the problem on their hands was to honor Tchaikovsky by using a replica Tchaikovsky, and they found comfort in duplicating the details that made the skull identifiable as belonging to a specific person. "We are no longer using the real skull as Yorick," the actors told the Property Manager, "but would like to use a cast of it (complete with [gold] teeth)" (quoted in Aebischer 2004, 87).¹³ By insisting upon using a copy of the skull in their

performance, the actors seemed to be displaying the kind of squeamishness that Phoebe Spinrad claims characterizes our modern avoidance of death. In this case, however, the act of copying the body part was an attempt not to degrade, but to preserve what was valuable about the original, just as Edwin Booth made a papier maché cast of his father's favorite skull in order to preserve the real one. For Booth, the skull was sacred, and thus unusable, because of its association with the Shakespearean lineage, not because it once belonged to a horse thief. The RSC actors, by contrast, were unwilling to use the skull because they could not forget that it once sat on the shoulders of a pianist named Tchaikovsky.¹⁴

The most recent appearance of Tchaikovsky's skull, which was chosen to play Yorick alongside David Tennant's Hamlet in a 2008 production at the RSC, replicates the ontological problem of bringing "real death" on stage while emphasizing the surprising persistence of this unusual stage relic. Gregory Doran, the director, spoke familiarly and affectionately of the object in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, downplaying the potentially grotesque nature of Tchaikovsky's bequest: "It was sort of a little shock tactic. Though, of course, to some extent that wears off and it's just Andre, in his box" (Smith 2008). Here again, however, the business of fulfilling the dead pianist's request proved more difficult than it first appeared. The company was unable to secure permission from Human Tissue Authority to use the skull for the previews, and so Tennant reverted to the RSC's resident fake skull. As Jonathan Bate's commentary on the production aptly points out, this object had its own kind of sacred charge, perhaps greater than that of the hapless pianist, because it had been handed down from actor to actor since the days of Edmund Kean. "There is a rumour," Bate reports, "that when the precious relic was first brought out, Tennant was so nervous that he dropped it" (Bate 2008).¹⁵ Because of its association with famous Shakespearean actors, the fake quality of the skull never prevented it from becoming a cherished memento in its own right.

As with all rumors, and all stories about relics, this narrative becomes less interesting once we attempt to ascertain whether or not it is true. What matters here is that Bate found it plausible that the aura of dead performers would give the prop skull a kind of electric charge, more so even than a piece of an actual human body. When they finally did succeed in gaining permission to use Tchaikovsky's skull instead of the RSC's fake skull, Doran decided to keep this information from the public, thinking it would overshadow the play itself. And when the news did emerge, just ahead of the production's move from Stratford to the West End, the papers were full of gossip about the skull and its origins — more or less ignoring, to Bate's frustration, the quality of Tennant's performance. The skull was eventually cut from the bill when its fame began to compete with that of Mr. Tennant, best known as the star of the popular television show *Dr. Who*. A prop skull once

handled by Kean might be too volatile for the actor who knows the significance of that lineage, but the real skull was far too lively a subject to be brought onto the London stage. It is possible to see the entire story, including Bates's defense of the acting as the real theatrical attraction, as a very successful publicity ploy. Whether or not all these revelations were intentional, what matters is that the play's investigation of death still intersects in surprising ways with the actor's own desire to be part of a kind of institutional immortality. While my nineteenth-century anecdotes are characterized by a simultaneous obsession with and inability to police the identity of the real human skulls used on stage, the twentieth-century actors described above seem far more comfortable with the use of fake skulls, relying on the power of the theatrical fiction to endow the object with meaning.

I have argued that in foregrounding the anonymity of death, the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* undermines the prince's recognition of the skull as definitively belonging to Yorick, but the play does leave room for a different type of faith in the power of objects. If we see the skulls not as inherent bearers of meaning but as anchors for the stories theater practitioners tell about each other, it is less easy to dismiss Hamlet's decision to address the skull by the name of "Yorick." In that moment, within the context of the tragedy, Hamlet is successfully memorializing his dead friend. Whether or not the skull can be properly identified does not change the fact that it functions, in this moment, as a memory aid. It is this lack of concern about the authenticity of the relic in question, bolstered by a certain kind of faith in the theater itself, that characterizes my final narrative involving the afterlife of human skulls.

This story begins in 1999 with death of Del Close, an American actor famous for his improvisational skill and for his work in the Chicago improv scene with superstars such as Bill Murray and Mike Myers. The comedian's dying wish was to have his head donated to the Goodman Theater so that his skull could appear as Yorick, and soon after Close's death, the actors at the Goodman accepted the gift of the skull at the hands of his long-time partner, Charna Halpern. Although they have yet to cast it in *Hamlet*, company members have dutifully carried it on stage in productions of *Pericles* and Stoppard's *Arcadia*. In subsequent years, however, a controversy arose over the skull's authenticity when Chicagoans demanded proof that the skull was in fact Close's. An investigative article in the *Tribune* pointed out that the skull was held together by rusty screws, and that other distinguishing marks suggested it had had a prior life as part of a teaching skeleton.

Under mounting pressure, Halpern admitted that she had in fact perpetrated a hoax. The trouble, she explained, was that it was impossible to find a doctor willing to remove and clean the head, and so she went shopping for a replacement that would "match Del's big brain cavity and nice, high cheekbones" (Friend 2006). The transformation of an ordinary teaching skull into the skull of a famous comedian is perhaps the best example of how stage relics gain meaning through their

connection with the theater. Rather than duplicating the real skull as Edwin Booth and the RSC cast members sought to do, Halpern replaced it with a skull that had similar physical characteristics. Ironically, she found herself relying on a kind of phrenology, but without the pretense of using it to confirm an exact lineage. Even as a hoax, however, Halpern's solution was short lived; the skull had teeth, whereas Close wore dentures, and removing the molars proved to be more difficult than expected. A handful of teeth remained, later serving as evidence that the skull was not that of Del Close. Halpern was undaunted by the revelation, though, and was even briefly tempted to take a page out of the Lancashire gravedigger's book. She imagined she might present the theater with a second, more convincing head and, while admitting that she had fooled them the first time, assure them that *this* was in fact the "real" Close. Apart from the extraordinary spirit of playfulness that characterizes this entire narrative, I am intrigued by the fact that a contemporary American actor with few professional links to the Shakespearean stage was so committed to appearing posthumously in *Hamlet*. Close's bequest provides further proof of our national fascination with Shakespeare, but I would also like to think that he shared my reading of the graveyard scene. Who else but a professional comedian would understand the irony of asking to be immortalized in a scene that deals so rudely with human remains?

In posthumously joining the cast of *Hamlet*, minor celebrities such as Close and Tchaikovsky are linking their material remains to an institution that will survive, in one form or another, long after their bones have become unrecognizable. "As a working actor," Del Close once told the manager at the Goodman, "I'll accept any role — even if you just toss me into a desert scene with other vulture-picked bones, that would be great" (Friend 2006). Close's story makes clear that it is not the individual character, or even the playwright, who matters so much as being a part of a living theatrical enterprise. Skull relics escape namelessness because of Shakespeare, but also because we, the audience, accept each one as a token pointing toward something we collectively accept as "Yorick." That dramatic identity contains within it an entire stage history, not always as visible or as coherent as the signatures on the cranium of the Furness skull, but nonetheless a vital part of the narrative that sustains the play's hold over us. By attracting individuals who were not members of the Shakespearean establishment during their lifetimes, the skull invites, and simultaneously disrupts, the desire of actors and audience members to become part of an exclusive theatrical lineage.

Though he is something of an outlier in the narratives I have collected, I am compelled by Del Close's interest in shaking up, rather than propping up, the Shakespearean lineage — the same interest that may have inspired the unnamed actor in Lancashire to taunt his Hamlet with the specter of Dr. Banks. Theirs is a different type of transcendence, one rooted in the theater's ability to lend

new meanings to old objects, making them relics through use rather than preservation. Despite our collective cultural fantasies, these objects point not to a single moment in history, but to a theatrical tradition that embraces a multiplicity of bodies and eventually subsumes them. Hamlet's skulls teach us that immortality comes not from the stability of individual identity, but from the willingness to offer oneself up the profound ephemerality of dramatic performance.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Peter Berek, Jane Hwant Degenhardt, Adam Zucker, Arthur Kinney, and all the members of the Five-College Renaissance Seminar at the University of Massachusetts for their thoughtful responses to an early version of this paper. I am also indebted to John Pollack, Peter Stallybrass, Dan Traister, and the entire staff at the Annenberg Rare and Manuscript Books Library at the University of Pennsylvania, for introducing me to my first skull.
2. As Margreta de Grazia points out, "it is the very anonymity of the remains which frees Hamlet to flesh them out." She also provides an elegant analysis of the scene's engagement with class hierarchies, a dynamic which is exacerbated, rather than smoothed over, in the nineteenth-century narratives I have collected below (de Grazia 2007, 136; 129-57).
3. Skulls properties appear in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, and *The White Devil*. For a full list, see Dessen and Thomson 1999. Later plays such as *The Revenger's Tragedy* pushed the conceit of re-animating bodily remains to its furthest extreme and eventually fell out of favor with post-Restoration audiences, but *Hamlet's* more subtle treatment of the subject became increasingly popular as the centuries wore on. Textual references to *Hamlet* are to the Arden 3 edition.
4. In addition to the broader theme of death's attack on individuality, the scene seems to be addressing one of the particular problems associated with bodily remains in Shakespeare's London. As in other early modern cities, bones were frequently moved from dirt graves to charnel houses to make room for fresh corpses. The bodies of aristocrats were generally kept safe from such violation, surrounded by layers of stone and brass, though in the case of the unfortunate Ophelia, anxieties about her unceremonious funeral are echoed by the prince's mistreatment of Polonius's corpse and by the violation of Ophelia's grave. All these abuses are, in turn, shown up as abuses by Hamlet's remark about the way the gravedigger degrades the seriousness of his work: "How the knave jowls it to th' ground, as if 'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder" (5.1.72-73).
5. My thinking about the stage history of *Hamlet* is very much indebted to Aebischer's work on the play.

6. For a broader semiotic reading of the skull's function, see Teague 1991. Teague argues persuasively that the skull takes on multiple resonances in the scene, the *memento mori* being only one of them (23-25).
7. Graham Holderness has pointed out that the skull property in *Hamlet* is not an anonymous *memento mori* but "an individualized skull, the recognizable remains of someone known and loved" (Holderness 2007, 227). This gloss on Garber's reading is an important one, but I remain unconvinced that in performance, the skull is necessarily individualized as Yorick.
8. See Holderness 1998 and Hodgdon 1998.
9. Garrick is considered the founder of modern bardolatry. He celebrated the first Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford in 1769. For a more detailed discussion of nineteenth-century stage relics, see Williamson 2007.
10. Acknowledging this tension, the rare books librarians at the University of Pennsylvania lent the skull out to a group of students in the mid-1990s for a production of *The Revenger's Tragedy* (Traister 2000, 76).
11. I am thinking here of Igor Kopytoff's discussion of an object's life history (Kopytoff 1986).
12. Recent conversations with Daniel Traister suggest that John Reed's skull is identical with the Furness skull. The object is now "on view at the Walnut Street Theatre downtown, where it memorializes its donor, who, when alive, wanted his skull, at least, to achieve stage immortality" (private correspondence January 6, 2009). In the 1990s, another outsider, Jonathan Hartmann, willed his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company after being refused admission as an actor. He specified that his skull was to have its own billing: "the skull of Yorick is played by the skull of Jonathan Hartmann" (Lister 1995).
13. As Howard Marchitello argues, "[i]n playing Yorick, Tchaikovsky's skull will achieve such an immortality — but only to the degree to which the skull continues to embody Tchaikovsky" (Marchitello 1997, 125).
14. Some productions, such as Kenneth Branagh's 1999 film version, even go so far as to consciously alter the skull property to indicate its uniqueness. Branagh provides a flashback of young Hamlet sitting on the clown's lap, and gives Yorick's skull buck teeth to match those of the actor, Ken Dodd. Clearly separated from the five ordinary skulls strewn about the graveyard, Yorick's head gets its own close-up, so that neither Hamlet nor the audience can sustain any doubts about its provenance. Behind Branagh's personalizing of the skull property is the desire to privilege the spirit of Hamlet's monologue, to assert that objects will somehow retain the traces of living persons — especially Shakespearean persons. But the life history of Ken Dodd's skull did not end here; after the shoot, the producers presented Dodd with the skull as a *memento*

(Aebischer 2004, 96). Thus the manufactured skull became the relic of a particular performance, associated not only with Ken Dodd but with Branagh himself, and through Branagh with the entire pantheon of Shakespearean acting.

15. Bate also picks up on the presence of multiple skulls on stage, remarking that "[t]o focus on whether this one skull is real or not is to forget that at least three skulls are called for by the text" (Bate 2008).

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Critical Essays Yorick's Skull as a Major Symbol. Throughout the play, Hamlet muses on and toys with the idea of death. His famous fourth soliloquy's opening lines, "To be, or not to be" shows Hamlet thinking about suicide. His turning point of realization comes in the graveyard scene. Hamlet looks at the skull and remembers the man he was fond of, the court jester Yorick. In his musings, Hamlet realizes that death eliminates the differences between people. The hierarchical structure of society is illusory and ultimately crumbles into dust, just like the bones of those long In performances as Yorick the skull simultaneously was animated by Shakespeare's language and scripted the actions of his/its co-stars. The skull therefore acted within all of these narrative dramas. The Furness skull thereby transcends the very spirit of memento mori that Yorick and other stage skulls often represent. 10.1057/9781137402455 - Performing Objects and Theatrical Things, Edited by Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy. Related Papers. "Yorick's Afterlives: Skull Properties in Performance." By Elizabeth Williamson. Shakespeare, a Galera and a Surreal World of Objects.pdf. Yorick's Afterlives: Skull Properties in Performance. Hamlet's address to Yorick's skull is at the heart of the Shakespearean canon, remains in productions of Hamlet reveals a strong desire on the part of actors 3. Preview. PASCALIE AEBISCHER. Yorick's Skull: Hamlet's Improper Property. In the mid-nineteenth century, at a provincial performance of Hamlet at the Rochdale Theatre. 5. Preview.